

THEY ANSWERED THE CALL

DONNY FEIN

Ramat Bet
Shemesh,
Israel

What began with a single WhatsApp post has grown into a remarkable network connecting people in need with those looking to do a mitzvah

By Donny Louis



The Eye of the Needle

When Donny Fein joined me on a Google Meet call recently from his unassuming home office that featured three active monitors and a smile that didn't leave his face the entire time we spoke, I noticed that one screen was his real estate work and another was WhatsApp. But the third was the largest, containing his Mitzvah Opportunity spreadsheet.

I asked him how it all started, and he thought for a moment. "Actually," he replied, "it goes back to 2005."

One day at work, a more senior level col-

league who was apparently doing just fine came over to Donny's desk looking uncomfortable. "Donny," he said, "I need \$2,000 to pay my electric bill. Can you help me?" Donny didn't have \$2,000. He sat there for a moment thinking through what that actually meant. No electricity. No hot water. The refrigerator goes off. Kids with no food. He had to do something.

He decided to post the request on a Jewish community Yahoo group, something he had never done before. Within minutes, a woman he'd never met responded. She didn't ask questions; she just asked for the address and said she'd drop off the \$2,000. That was it. Donny never found out who she was, and her email has since been de-

activated, but he never forgot what she did.

Fast-forward to 2016. Donny was on a bus scrolling through a local Ramat Beit Shemesh group when he saw a post. A woman had no money for Shabbos food. Would anyone help? He stared at it for a moment, thinking back to that day in the office 11 years earlier.

"If she's posting that publicly, you know she's really at the end of her rope," he says. "I don't mind sharing that I was going through financial struggles myself at the time. I didn't have anything to give her, but perhaps I could help find others who could. Then maybe Hashem would help me as well."

He looked into the situation, confirmed

that it was true, collected a few hundred shekels and drove over to deliver them. The woman was overjoyed. “And then,” Donny says, “it just became a thing.”

That “thing” is now Mitzvah Opportunity, a registered charity centered around a WhatsApp community with 1,300 members, plus additional subgroups that pop up for specific causes. Since 2017, the group has raised 15 million shekels, roughly \$5 million, distributed across rent, medical bills, groceries, weddings, soldiers’ gear, flights and apartment renovations. In a single month, the group once processed over 100,000 shekels.

A typical message might read, “A family in Ramat Beit Shemesh is about to have their electricity shut off. They need 20,000 shekels by Monday. Who’s in?” The group then makes its moves. “Put me down for 500.” “I can give 1,000.” “Only 100 right now, but I’m in.” Donny logs the commitments, sends the links and processes the funds.

He once worked briefly for a major Jewish fundraising organization, but it didn’t last long.

“I quickly realized that it wasn’t for me. That was about the big donors. I don’t want to take someone to dinner because he’s going to hand me a check at the end. I never want to look at anyone as a number.”

Donny brings a clear business mindset to Mitzvah Opportunity, and he thinks that’s part of why it works. In the beginning, he was scribbling tallies on napkins at the dinner table, adding totals by hand. Today, it’s spreadsheets and systems. He looks at the group the way an investor might look at a portfolio. “I offer the highest ROI possible,” he says, only half-joking. “It’s unlimited.”

There are no set hours for this kind of work. Sometimes Donny handles a crisis in the few minutes between his *Daf Yomi shiur* and his next *chavrusa*, sending off a few WhatsApp messages or making calls to the right person at the right moment.

For a long time his mother didn’t know what he was doing. “She called me one day and said, ‘A friend of mine told me about this *tzedakah* WhatsApp group you run.’ ‘Yeah, Mom,’ I said. ‘I’ve been doing it for the past five years.’ ‘Can you add me?’ she wanted to know.

“I know where the *brachah* comes from. I’ve seen enough to know that Hashem is going to make sure these families get the help they need. The only question is whether we want to be part of it.”

Donny tells me there are hundreds of stories he could share. We’ll start with a small one, the type of thing that for him is a regular Tuesday. A woman recently reached out about a family that needed help paying for a wedding. Donny saw the message



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but hadn't had a chance to respond. The next day he was standing in IKEA with his son picking out a closet when a friend from the US messaged him out of nowhere. He wanted to sponsor the full cost of a wedding. The offer was completely unsolicited.

"I'm standing in IKEA trying to hold back my tears," Donny recalls. There was nothing random about what just happened. Hashem wanted this man to help that family.

Members of the group have reported another pattern that has ceased to surprise Donny. They fall on hard times and have to stop giving. Then they push themselves to give something regularly again, and shortly afterward a job comes through or a deal closes. He has watched this play out enough times that he no longer tries to explain it. "I don't want to track it," he says. "I just know what I know."

The story of the Cohen family (name changed) is the kind that even Donny has a hard time believing.

The Cohens moved to Israel about a decade ago. They have four children, two of whom have a serious neurological condition. The father is a warm and unassuming guy. The mother is the kind of person who's always smiling, holding everything together by some force that defies nature. Donny had helped them in small ways over the years. Then, in December 2022, they called with something bigger. The boys needed surgeries that couldn't be performed in Israel. The whole family would have to travel to Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. They needed flights, temporary housing, transportation and groceries.

"Consider it done," I said, even though I wasn't exactly sure how it would happen." By then Donny had spent years quietly assembling something most people don't know exists until they need it: a network of hidden *tzaddikim*. The flights were soon covered, but then came the next problem. The family would be landing land at JFK, so someone had to get them to Philadelphia.

Somehow—and with Donny "somehow"

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is a recurring word—he was connected to a woman whose late husband had spent his life giving lifts to *yeshivah* boys as his personal mitzvah. After he passed away, she picked up where he left off; this woman is apparently something of a legend in her neighborhood. She drove the Cohen family from JFK to Philadelphia. Two weeks later, she drove back just to visit them.

The family settled in Lakewood while the boys recuperated. Within days, a WhatsApp group of ten people had formed especially for them, coordinating food, rides to the hospital and babysitting.

A local supermarket put money in an account under their name. The owner of a well-known housewares chain outfitted their apartment with pots, pans, appliances, towels and everything else they needed at no charge. They were there during Pesach, and the group arranged for the kitchen to be *kashered*.

Meanwhile, back in Israel, a woman who knew the family and was aware of Donny's involvement had the keys to their apartment. What she found inside needed serious attention. There was a lot of mold and very little airflow. She called Donny.

"I'm not a fundraiser," he's quick to say. "I don't ask people for money. I don't pres-

sure anyone. I'm more like Grand Central Station. I just put out the information." He posted what was needed, and people stepped forward one after the other.

Someone knew a contractor who could get rid of mold. Someone else handled the paint. Proper ventilation was installed throughout. By the time the work was done, Donny estimates they'd put almost \$20,000 into the place. When the time came to come home, Eli Rowe, the founder of Hatzolah Air, personally took care of the tickets.

The family walked into an apartment they didn't recognize.

"Whatever this mother needed was going to come through," Donny says. "Hashem was using me as a tool. Hashem put these people in the world so that someone could have the merit to help them."

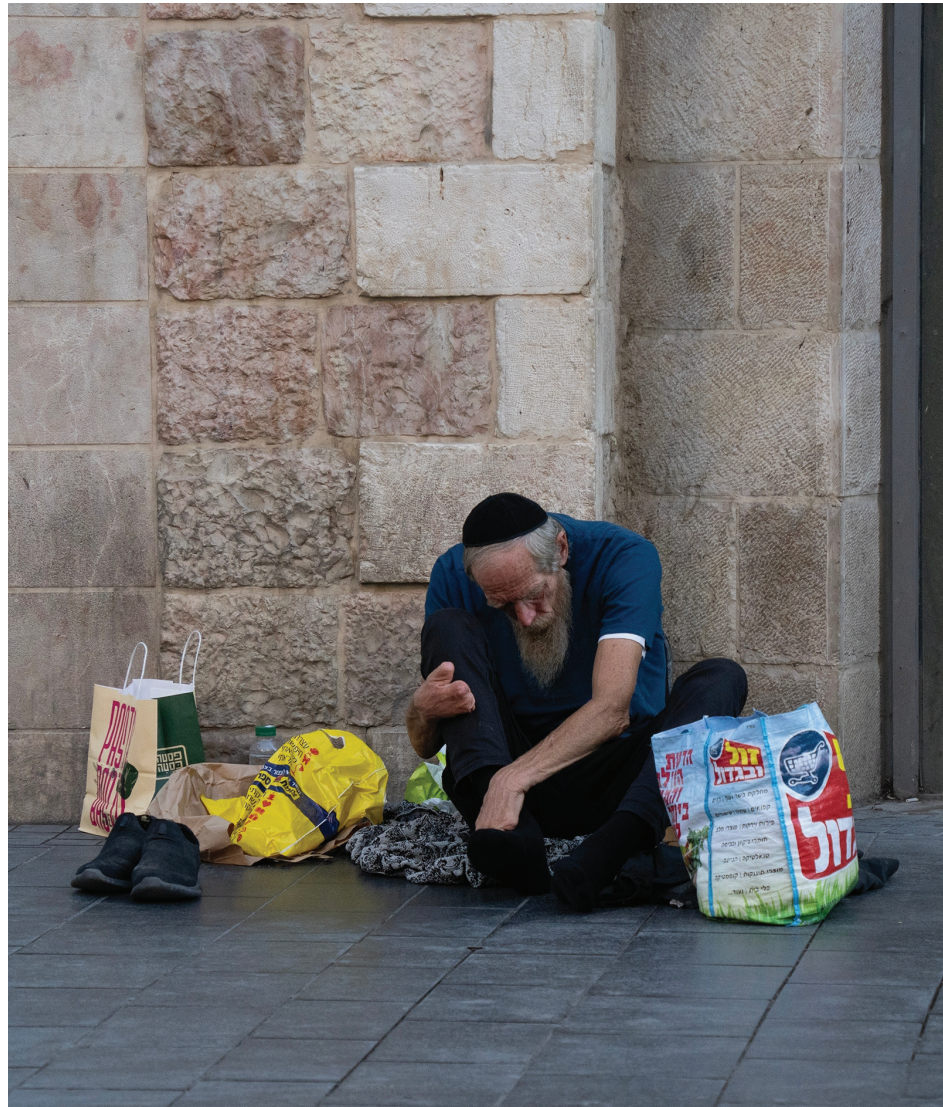
The Lakewood community that had rallied around this one family didn't disband after they flew home. Those connections stayed warm.

After October 7, that same network mobilized and raised millions of shekels for causes related to the war. Something that began with one family needing a ride from JFK had become something much larger.

Donny got a call from his friend Tzachi shortly after the war broke out. He was flying to Israel to be with his son in *yeshivah*. Donny told him he was out of his mind. There was a war going on. *Yeshivah bachurim* were going home to the US, not the other way around. Tzachi wouldn't hear of it.

Decades earlier, his own father had flown to Israel during the Gulf War simply to be with his son who was learning there. When Donny saw he that couldn't dissuade him, he figured it wouldn't hurt if Tzachi brought a few things along. Tzachi boarded a plane in Florida with 70 duffel bags stuffed with toys for the children of soldiers deployed at the front, gear, supplies, and special packages for the soldiers' wives. A friend of Donny's in Hollywood, Florida, had basically cleared out a hobby store on request.

“The man sent her a large amount, more than enough to get her started. And every year since then, he sends her another \$10,000.”



The bags arrived at Donny's house, which became a distribution center. Two men from America flew to Israel to volunteer as drivers, loading up at the door and heading out to address after address.

Then, one day, a soldier called Donny and told him a story. His unit had been given two drones for a particular mission, one of them paid for by Mitzvah Opportunity. According to Donny, that drone was the one that put an end to the Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. Donny still sounds a little stunned when he tells the story.

A few weeks later, the same soldier called again. That same drone had spotted a terrorist before the soldier's unit entered a building. The terrorist shot the drone down, but the unit had seen enough to know what was waiting for them. They went in prepared and walked

out alive. "They obviously needed a new drone to replace the one that was shot down," Donny says simply. "So we got it for them."

"We've handled cases that no other organization would touch because things were just too complex, but somehow we figured it out."

A woman in Jerusalem was in a terrible spot. Her husband had fled the country, leaving her with ten children and a mountain of debt. Social services removed the children from the home. In order to get them back, she had to prove herself by attending scheduled visits and demonstrating that she "qualified" as a parent. She was committed to doing whatever was necessary, but she didn't have a shekel to her name. Donny posted a voice message she'd sent him to the Mitzvah Oppor-

tunity WhatsApp group. Someone heard it and reached out. "What does she need?" he asked. "She needs money," Donny told him. "A lot of it."

The man sent her a large amount, more than enough to get her started. And every year since then he sends her another \$10,000.

The Midrash in *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* (5:2) tells us, "Open for Hashem an opening no bigger than the eye of a needle, and He will open an entrance for you wide enough for wagons to pass through."

Donny has his own version.

"I jumped through the eye of a needle with that one little act of *chesed* over 20 years ago. It taught me that when you do something like that, Hashem doesn't just open an entrance for wagons. He opens an entire universe." »